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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/PB, DRL/FO

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SUBJECT: ENGAGING BANGLADESH'S RAPID ACTION BATTALION: THE
WAY FORWARD

REF: REF: (A) IIR 6 925 0706 07 (B) 03 STATE 34981

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is the lead Bangladeshi security force for countering terrorism. Yet since its creation the U.S. government has not engaged the 10,000-member paramilitary group because of human rights concerns stemming from persistent reports of extrajudicial killings. In recent months, reports of such incidents have declined, and the RAB and Bangladeshi Caretaker Government have voiced determination to respect internationally recognized human rights standards. Embassy Dhaka recommends the Department consider a gradual and selective engagement with the RAB, in strict adherence with Leahy Amendment vetting requirements, to advance the key Mission goals of countering terrorism and promoting human rights. The initial focus will be on human rights training and will expand to other areas only if RAB's human rights record continues to improve. End Summary.

RAB'S UNSAVORY BACKGROUND

¶2. (SBU) The RAB was created in 2003, modeled on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation with intelligence-gathering and arrest powers, as a specialized force to crack down on spiraling crime, including terrorism. It is organized into 12 battalions in Dhaka and seven other cities; about 40 percent of its members come from the police and nearly all the rest come from the military. The RAB says it has arrested about 22,000 suspects since its inception, more than one third on drug and arms charges. Another 450 of those apprehended were described as members of the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an Islamist organization that coordinated nearly 450 simultaneous small explosions around the country in 2005 and then unleashed a deadly bombing campaign, which included suicide attacks that terrorized the nation. Among those arrested were six JMB leaders who were executed in March 2007. In an October 3 meeting with CDA a.i., Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed acknowledged that the JMB network could not have been dismantled without the work of the RAB.

¶3. (C) Since its founding, the RAB has been accused of hundreds of crossfire deaths, which human-rights organizations say are extrajudicial killings. Concerned about the number of credibly reported crossfire and custodial deaths, Embassy policy has been to deny any RAB member or former member USG-funded training. Until recently, Post has been unable to get answers from the GOB on questions about

allegations of human rights abuses by RAB members.

SIGNS OF POSITIVE CHANGE

14. (C) In response to a diplomatic note from the Embassy requesting information on RAB extrajudicial killings, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on September 10 issued a non-paper and supporting documents (Ref A) that outlined how allegations of RAB human rights abuses are purportedly investigated and resolved. (Note: The claims of judicial redress must be treated with care. A senior police official in the city of Rajshahi told EmbOff in September that RAB was being uncooperative in investigations into a case of a young man allegedly beaten to death by its members. End Note). The Ministry called for USG-funded training of RAB members including human rights training, noting that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) already has conducted such courses and that the United Kingdom plans a similar program next year. At a September 13 meeting organized by the MFA and attended by the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission and the Defense Attache, representatives from several GOB ministries, the RAB and the military underscored their willingness to engage the USG on human rights concerns.

15. (SBU) Information gathered by the Bangladeshi human-rights organization Odhikar, a vocal RAB critic, indicates that extrajudicial killings have declined in recent months. In a paper issued to mark the 240-day anniversary of the Caretaker Government, Odhikar said that the number of reported extrajudicial killings by all security forces fell from more than 20 in each of the first three 30-day periods after the Government came to power on January 11 to an average of less

DHAKA 00001602 002 OF 002

than 10 for each of the three most recent 30-day periods. Although RAB accounted for more than half of those extrajudicial killings, the number of people allegedly killed in crossfire or gunfights with the battalion was four in July and four in August, far below the figures for most previous months.

16. (SBU) Odhikar chief Adilur Rahman Khan argues that the decline in reported extrajudicial killings is a result of pressure from "international friends" such as non-governmental organizations and diplomats. He said such pressure needs to be sustained and voiced support for human rights training for RAB. A British High Commission analysis of the Odhikar-compiled statistics said that while extrajudicial killings of Bangladeshi security forces were still too high there was "increasing evidence of law-enforcement agents being brought to account for various crimes," including human rights violations. It specifically noted that extrajudicial killings were down in August despite high levels of civil unrest.

THE WAY FORWARD

17. (C) Meanwhile, the need to work with Bangladesh to fight terrorism has never been greater. The country's porous land, sea and air borders have long been of USG concern. Neighboring India in recent months has blamed Bangladeshi terrorists for deadly bombings in Hyderabad, and Bangladeshis are suspected in a recent terrorist bombing in Maldives. Bangladesh's potential as a transit hub and safe haven for terrorists were among the key agenda items at the inaugural USG regional security initiative conference for South Asia that met in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on September 7. Although there are units of the Bangladeshi military that play a role in fighting terrorists and receive U.S. assistance, the main national counterterrorism mandate is with the RAB.

18. (C) Given these developments, Post suggests we begin

nominating carefully selected RAB members for appropriate training, which would initially focus on human rights and then branch out into other counterterrorism areas. It would be a gradual process dependent on sustained improvement in RAB's human rights record. Post is now surveying what USG-supported human rights training is available and most appropriate for RAB members. Potential participants would be vetted as individuals or component security-force units in strict accordance with Leahy Amendment guidelines (Ref B).

¶9. (C) At the September 13 meeting between Embassy Dhaka and GOB representatives, both sides agreed to nominate a single point of contact for facilitating exchanges of information on alleged cases of abuse. Embassy Dhaka on October 2 chose its point of contact and immediately informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has promised to identify a GOB counterpart. The GOB also agreed to &suitably release information on a case-by-case basis and where particular concerns have been raised," which would help the Embassy build a database for Leahy Amendment vetting purposes. The Embassy will maintain its ongoing contact with an array of human-rights groups such as Odhikar, which provide information on alleged abuses by RAB and other security forces that are essential for proper vetting. Army Chief Moeen also promised CDA a.i. that the army would fully cooperate with our efforts to investigate alleged human rights abuses by individual members of Bangladeshi security forces.

¶10. (C) Conclusion: Embassy Dhaka,s Mission Strategic Plan sets counterterrorism and promoting human rights as two top goals. Maximizing progress in both areas requires a careful, considered engagement with the RAB. Only then can we put the full force of USG resources to work to improve human rights in Bangladesh. Only then can our efforts to prevent Bangladesh from becoming a staging ground and transit point for international Islamic terrorism be most effective.

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